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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION - Update: TIP Report Coverage in
Kuwait's Press Shifts Focus

Summary

Tuesday, July 08, 2008

1. (U) Summary. The TIP report's June 4 release triggered a plethora of articles, editorials, and op-eds responding to the report's contents. Initially, articles harshly challenged the report's content; some articles continued to cover the Government of Kuwait's (GOK) refutation of the report's contents. However, in recent days, scathing editorials have given way to reports of government efforts to address the issue, and editorials urging the GOK to take action. It is worth noting that the conservative English language daily Al-Watan ran a long investigative piece on the treatment of domestic workers in Kuwait, complete with a somewhat graphic picture. This cable is a snapshot of recent Kuwaiti press coverage of the still-evolving reaction to the content of the most recent TIP Report. End Summary.

2. (U) Block Quotes:

-- The newly established Arabic language daily, Al-Seyassah, reported that the Administration of International Relations at the Ministry of Justice refuted any allegations of trafficking in persons occurring in Kuwait. The report said: "There is no solid evidence supporting these allegations [of trafficking in persons]." It also confirmed that "the Kuwaiti Constitution protects citizens and residents rights", including the inhumane treatment of laborers."

-- Under the title, "530 laborers violating decision banning working at noon seized," the conservative Arabic language daily, Al-Watan, interviewed Dr. Saleh Al-Sheikh, Deputy Undersecretary at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Dr. Al-Sheikh stated (07/05): "During the Ministry's surprise inspection tours of workplaces in Kuwait between the hours of noon and four, the Ministry found 530 workers in violation of the Ministry's by-law, which bans work during this period. The Ministry's by-law number 2005/157 bans laborers in Kuwait from working in an environment where they would be subject to direct sun exposure. During the Ministry's June inspection tours, 530 workers were found to be in violation of that law. Secondary inspections in the same locations during the same month revealed 293 cases of violation."

-- Chief Editor of Al-Watan English language daily in Kuwait, and daily columnist in Al-Watan's Arabic daily, Dr. Ali Al-Tarrah opined (07/05): "Marginal labor in Kuwait is a big problem and growing fast because the source of the problem is not being addressed. The government must take strict measures against those who trade in residency permits rather than simply opening shelters. Traders in

residency permits wander free without having any sense of their responsibilities. All countries in the world have their own regulations, except Kuwait, where things are loose and no regulations are in existence."

-- The conservative Arabic language daily, Al-Shahid reported that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is considering establishing a company for ensuring laborers' wages (07/05): "The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is studying a proposal from Dr. Walid Al-Tabtabaei, Chairman of the National Assembly's Human Rights; the proposal aims to solve the problem of laborers having their wages withheld by their employers. The Ministry is considering establishing a company that would be in charge of collecting the wages of laborers from private sector companies and then paying the laborers their salaries through the Ministry." The Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Bader Al-Duwaila told reporters in an earlier press conference that the Ministry "is very serious about finding solutions to foreign workers' problems."

-- The conservative Arabic language daily Al-Watan interviewed Lawyer Al-Thuwaimir (07/05). In reference to an MP's promise of an investigation during a Committee for Human Rights meeting, Al-Thuwaimir said to Al-Anbaa [Arabic language daily]: "citizens have the right to know if past or present officials in the National Assembly are involved in trafficking in persons." He added that the [Kuwaiti] "Constitution gives us the right to prosecute those who misuse their positions of authority as public servants. If former officials were guilty of trafficking in persons, we need to know and prosecute them. Legal immunity only protects current MPs, but we need to know who they are so that we can prosecute them in the future."

KUWAIT 00000772 002 OF 002

-- The conservative English language daily Al-Watan ran a story under the headline, "Exploring conflicting reports of sexual abuse on domestic workers in Kuwait." The report featured a graphic picture of an injured Kuwait-based domestic, quoted extensively from the TIP report, but also interviewed Kuwaitis alleged to be involved in human rights issues. The article quoted Hamdan K. Al-Nimshan, described as an advocate and legal consultant: "Sexual abuse takes place all over the world and not only in Kuwait. I believe the reason there is so much controversy about the issue of sexual abuse amongst domestic workers is because we have a lot of servants in Kuwait. Yes, there are cases of domestic workers who have been sexually abused by their sponsors but I believe that the report that was released by the human rights society was exaggerated. There are not that many maids being sexually abused, on the contrary, most of these maids come to Kuwait and receive good treatment. When these maids go on their annual leave, their sponsors drive them to the airport, process their paper work and do not leave the airport until they have finished all necessary documents. Many of the employers buy their workers mobile phones, give them gifts and ensure that they have free time to relax." The article also quoted several domestics who related stories of physical and sexual abuse, as well as an anonymous source from the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait, saying: "We have a lot of problems regarding rape, physical injuries and sexual harassment here at the embassy. Some domestic workers are being abducted and forced into prostitution and these workers are unable to defend themselves. We have rescued 121 workers from October, 2005, who have been victims of abuse including sexual abuse. It is likely that the numbers are a lot higher but we are not authorized to go into every house and monitor how employers are treating their staff. The number of workers being sexually abused by their employees on a monthly basis is roughly two per month, and these are the ones who runaway and seek the Embassy's support. The real number is hard to obtain because most of the workers are afraid to come forward for various reasons; some do not do anything about it because they feel afraid, while some receive verbal threats, by their employers."

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/kuwait/?cable s>

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